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SUBJECT: Who will run Riga?

1. Nils Usakovs, leader of the leftist and heavily ethnic-Russian party, Harmony Center, will be the next mayor of Riga. This will mark the first time since the restoration of independence that an ethnic-Russian has filled the job. Although Harmony Center won a strong plurality of votes in the June 6 election, the week after the election featured widespread speculation that former Transport Minister Ainars Slesers would get the job, despite his third place finish. By all accounts, Slesers will play a vital, if not the central, role in running the city. Usakovs' election is itself a positive step for ethnic relations in Latvia, but many challenges lie ahead.

2. Harmony Center (SC) won 35 percent of the vote for Riga city council, far outpacing all other parties. Even with Riga's large ethnic Russian population, the high level of support for SC was a surprise. Slesers, who ran a campaign acting as if he had already won the job, finished a disappointing third. Usakovs then surprised many by not immediately acting as the presumptive mayor after the election. He proceeded to talk only with Slesers, whom he called his "strategic partner," about forming a coalition. Given Slesers' disappointing third place finish, far below where polls predicted he would be, any political observers could only shake their heads and wonder what was going on. When the June 15 announcement came that Usakovs would be mayor, it was Slesers who made it. The whole episode has convinced most Latvians that Slesers will be the de facto mayor. Two Latvian-language dailies ran headlines that captured this view, "We will say Usakovs, but we will think Slesers" and "Usakovs will get the job, but Slesers dominates the conversation." Slesers will serve as Vice-Mayor and be responsible for economic issues, while Usakovs will handle social issues.

3. As the first ethnic-Russian mayor since the fall of the Soviet Union, Usakovs has broken an important barrier in Latvian politics. As a naturalized citizen who graduated high school speaking almost no Latvian, Usakovs - who now speaks fluent Latvian - should be the poster boy for social integration in Latvia. But the way ahead is full of challenges. He has said that people should be able to get social services from the city in Russian, which leads Latvian nationalists to claim that he wants to make Russian a second official language. He has said that he will attend May 9 Soviet Victory Day celebrations as mayor, which leads to cries of disloyalty to the Latvian state and denial of the Soviet occupation. Already at his first press conference, he was asked if he would wear Latvian national dress at important cultural events and he demurred. If he succeeds as mayor, it could be a very positive step, but his alliance with and perceived obedience to Slesers - the face of what went wrong in Latvia for many Latvians - means he starts with a large negative against him in the minds of many.

ROGERS